

MIN 7012 W9 L1
Hebrews and James

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Introduction to the Epistle to the Hebrews

A. The People Addressed

- Jewish Christians
- Hellenized
- Persecuted
- Contemplating apostatizing and returning to Judaism

B. Destination

- Rome
- A Jewish-Christian base in the Church of Rome (inferred from Rom. 11:13, 18)
- Perhaps a small conservative Jewish group within the Church in Rome clinging to conservative Judaism
- Letter likely addressed to this particular group

C. Authorship

- Clement of Rome?
- Paul?
- Barnabas, Priscilla and Aquilla, Apollos, Luke, and Steve Harmon?
- After all the theories we simply don't know the person's name!
- What we can know about the author from the letter itself:
 - A second-generation Christian
 - A person well-versed in the LXX
 - A person who interpreted the scriptures in a creative, exegetical manner
 - A person with extensive vocabulary
 - Master of a fine, rhetorical style (very different from Paul)
 - An erudite scholar
 - A Hellenist

D. Date

- Some think prior to AD 70, as early as 60
- Most think sometime after AD 70 near the last part of the first century up to AD 95.
- An early second century Christian letter, 1 Clement, uses significant portions of it so it existed before .

E. Hebrews and the Old Testament

- Old Testament quotations: LXX
- Old Testament conceived as a divine oracle—direct from the mouth of God
- Old Testament conceived as a *maschal*—a mystery or parable awaiting interpretation
- Contrasts with Philo
 - Messianic typology/foreshadowings vs. Philo's allegorical representations of eternal ideals of metaphysics and ethics
 - *Historical* frame of reference regarding foreshadowings vs. Philo's *allegorical* approach
- Old Testament quotations: Often taken from Psalms, which also serve as a launching pad for exposition and consideration of other Old Testament texts

F. Hebrews and the Gospel

- The supremacy of Christ
 - Rule: Potentate
 - Revelation: Prophet
 - Reconciliation: Priest (primary emphasis)
- The main thrust of the Book of Hebrews: To set forth the *supremacy* of Christ so as to guard against *apostasy* from the Gospel of Christ

The letter to the Hebrews was written to encourage Christians in a time of trial. There would be enormous social pressure for the recipients of the letter to conform to standards of Roman citizenship such as attending feasts dedicated to national and local deities, worship of the emperor, worship and sacrifice to local and national deities. Also, their Jewish neighbors would find the recipient's withdrawal from the strict keeping of the Torah as dangerous. Both Gentile and Jew would use extreme social pressure and shaming techniques to draw the recipients back into the respective Gentile or Jewish mainstream and away from the worship of, from their perspective, a crucified revolutionary. The social environment was a difficult one for a Christian to remain loyal to Christ. An early Christian might be faced with being denied the ability to purchase food, clothing, and basic necessities by various merchants because they did not conform, and perhaps even faced with prison for sedition. They would face verbal and physical abuse and

assault, manipulation of the courts to allow for imprisonment and seizure of physical property and wealth in order to make a spectacle of the Christians and pressure them into "drawing back" (Heb 10:39) and abandon their "confidence" in Christ (Heb 10:35).

It encourages the recipients by focusing on the absolute supremacy and sufficiency of Jesus Christ. While God spoke in the past "many times and in many ways," he has now spoken to us "by his Son," Jesus Christ, who is the "exact imprint" of God's nature and who "upholds the universe by the word of his power" (1:1–3). Jesus accomplished complete salvation for all who trust in him (1:1–10:18). We dare not "neglect such a great salvation" (2:3, 5:12–6:20, 10:19–39). Rather, in our faith and in our everyday living, we should imitate the example of Christ and of those on the honor roll of faith (chap. 11–13).

Also it focuses on the "confidence" that believers have as members of the household of God. The Greek word used is *parrēsia* and means "confidence" or "boldness." In 10:19 this refers to the confidence they (should) have to enter into God's presence. Further back in 4:16 it is confidence that when they approach God for help ("approach the throne of grace") that grace will be given in their "time of need." Being under persecution is certainly a time of need. Finally in 3:6 "confidence" is what makes them a part of God's "house/household." The boldness/confidence they have brings them into God's presence, it is *how* they access help in time of need, and are part of God's household. So, entering into God's presence (10:19), receiving God's help in times of need (4:16) and being part of God's household (3:6) are the "reward" (10:35) that boldness/confidence bring.

James

Sometimes called "the Proverbs of the New Testament," the book of James, practically and faithfully, reminds Christians about how to live. From perseverance to true faith to controlling one's tongue, submitting to God's will, and having patience, this book aids readers in living authentically and wisely for Christ. Many have claimed that James and the apostle Paul differed on the question of faith versus works, but in reality, the spiritual fruit that James talks about simply demonstrates the true faith of which Paul wrote. Their writings are complementary rather than contradictory. Possibly one of the earliest of the New Testament writings (AD 40–50), the book is believed to have been written by Jesus's brother James (Gal. 1:19).

James

1. Authorship

Will the real James please stand up?

- A. Is the author James the father of Judas (not Iscariot) (Luke 6:16; Acts 1:13)?
- B. Is he James, the son of Alphaeus (Matt. 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13), elsewhere called James the Less (Mark 15:40)?
- C. Is he James, the son of Zebedee and the brother of John (Matt. 4:21, 10:2, 17:1; Mark 3:17; Acts 1:13), who was martyred by AD 44 (Acts 12:2)?
- D. Is he James, the Lord's brother (Matt. 13:55; Mark 6:3; Gal. 1:19; Acts 12:17, 15:13–21, 21:18; Gal. 2:9, 12)? Most likely, this is the man. Why?

- E. His use of the word “greeting” (*chairein*) here in James 1:1 is only found in Acts 25:23 and 23:26.
- F. His emphasis on the Law and use of the Sermon on the Mount (James 4:11–12, 5:12) fit “James the Just.”
- G. But could a Galilean ever master Koine Greek?
- H. Most likely, James was the half-brother of Jesus, born after Jesus (Matt. 1:24–25).
- I. He apparently did not accept Jesus’s claims until after the resurrection (1 Cor. 15:7).
- J. He continued to observe the Mosaic Law as a testimony to other Jews (Acts 21:18–25).
- K. Tradition places emphasis on his Jewish piety (camel knees?) and his making clear to others that Jesus was the Messiah.
- L. James suffered a violent death not long before the fall of Jerusalem.
- M. Possible this is written by a Christian who wishes to preserve the legacy of James the brother of Jesus and honor him.

2. Probable Date of Writing

- A. Josephus claims that James was martyred in AD 62.
- B. Date of writing: AD 45 to end of life?
- C. It is likely though that it is the earliest of the New Testament books. Why?
- D. No mention is made of Gentile Christians or their relation to Jewish Christians, as one would expect from a later work.
- E. Apart from talk of Jesus’s person, there is no distinctive theology in James, indicating the likelihood of an early date of composition, when Christianity was considered as belonging to Messianic Judaism.
- F. There is little verbal agreement with the Synoptics when setting forth the teaching of Christ, which suggests perhaps that James precedes them.
- G. The word “synagogue” (James 2:2) is used in addition to “church” and sets forth a simple structure of church government in terms of teachers (James 3:1, 5:14), patterned after the early synagogue.

3. Probable Place of Writing

The book of James was probably written in Jerusalem (Acts 12:17; Gal. 2:9, 12).

4. Probable Audience

- A. Hebrew Christians outside Palestine were the probable audience (James 1:1, cf. 1:19, 2:1, 7).
- B. The term “synagogue” is used. (James 2:2) Jewish ideas and forms of expression are used throughout. (James 2:19, 21, 4:11–12, 5:4, 12) There are no references to slavery or idolatry, fitting a Jewish audience.
- C. These were Christians beset with temptations, giving way to apathy in their Christian walk and many other things. What might some others be? James, most likely, had his finger on the pulse of Jewish Christians throughout the Roman world by way of his position of leadership in the Jerusalem Church.

5. Theme and Purpose

- A. Is the book of James a dogmatic treatise? Apologetic? Practical? The last of these three. *Attitudes* and *actions* will grow to reflect Christ in the Christian’s life. The *absence* of such development bespeaks death. James challenges his readers to take a deep look at their lives. How does one critically evaluate one’s own life? What is the relation of affections to behaviors? All changes in activity and attitudes should be marked by gratitude to God for God’s grace at work in one’s life.
- B. The key verses are James 1:22, 2:17, and 24.
- C. Key point: Apple trees bear apples, not prunes.

6. Structure, Important Features, and Outline

- A. Is the book of James “a right strawy epistle” in your estimation? Supposedly, such was the view of Luther on James. What do you make of the relation of James to Paul on works and faith? Gundry (2010, 435) argues that James speaks of our “*justification by works before other human beings*” whereas Paul speaks of our “*justification by faith before God*” (435). What do you make of this? Is it not the case that biblical faith is a response to God’s love? If so, how can a true believer go the route of dusty intellectualism or even dutiful moralism? True faith does not arise from the head or from the will but from the heart, wherein the Spirit of God resides. And if God’s Spirit lives in us, the same Spirit by whom the love of God has been poured out into our hearts (Rom. 5:5), we delight in taking care of the needs of orphans and widows in their distress, for this is the religion in which God delights (Jam. 1:27).
- B. One finds here an uncompromising ethic.
- C. One finds here a mix of the proverbial sage, the prophet, and the poet: the epistle of James is known as the “Proverbs of the New Testament.” Why? The epistle is marked by the terse “moralistic” style of the wisdom literature of the Old Testament. James was greatly impacted by the Wisdom Literature and the Sermon on the Mount. But James is also known as the “Amos of the NT” (See Amos.)
- D. The latter is written with authority and in the imperative mood (54 imperatives in a total of 108 verses).

- E. In James, one finds iron wrapped in velvet (the imperatives of the Gospel are wrapped up in the embrace of the Gospel—"my brethren" [11x] and "my beloved brethren" [3x]).
- F. James alludes to 22 Old Testament books.
- G. Does James have anything to say to the American church today? Or is it simply a book of straw that is of no value to the contemporary evangelical church? It is of value only if we have problems with trials and temptations, if we waver in our response to the Word, if we give preferential treatment to those of esteemed social status (valuing the outward, not the inward), if we find it difficult to control the tongue, if we are lured by worldliness, and if we think *unformed* faith is biblically *informed*. Concerning the last item noted, James would have nothing positive to say to those in the church who make a distinction between *formed* and *unformed* faith. There is no such thing as unformed faith. All faith is formed by love because biblical faith is faith *formed* by God's love for us, which, *in turn*, compels us to love God and others. *Such* faith is the only kind of faith that is biblically *informed*.

Reference:

Gundry, Robert H. 2010. "Commentary on James," In *Commentary on the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.